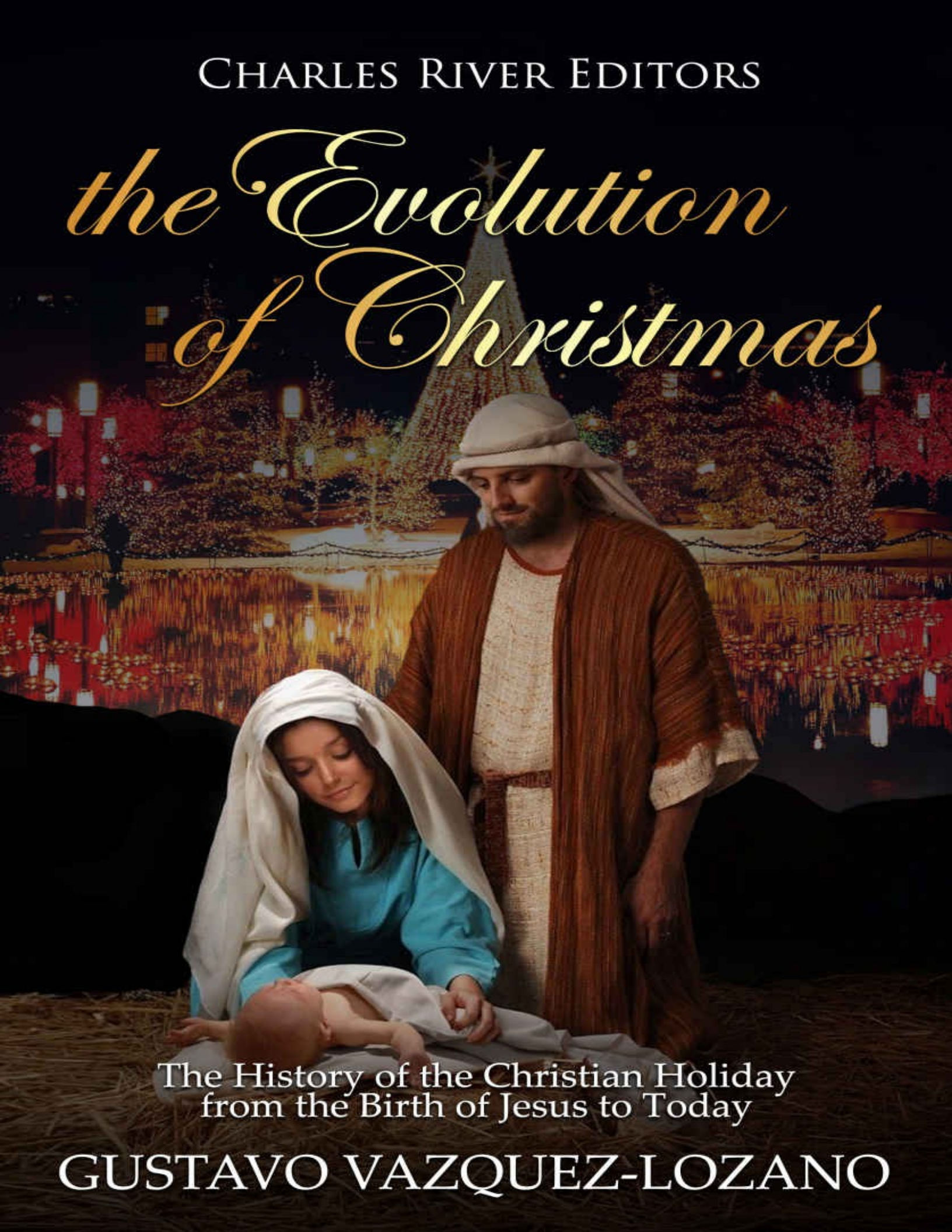
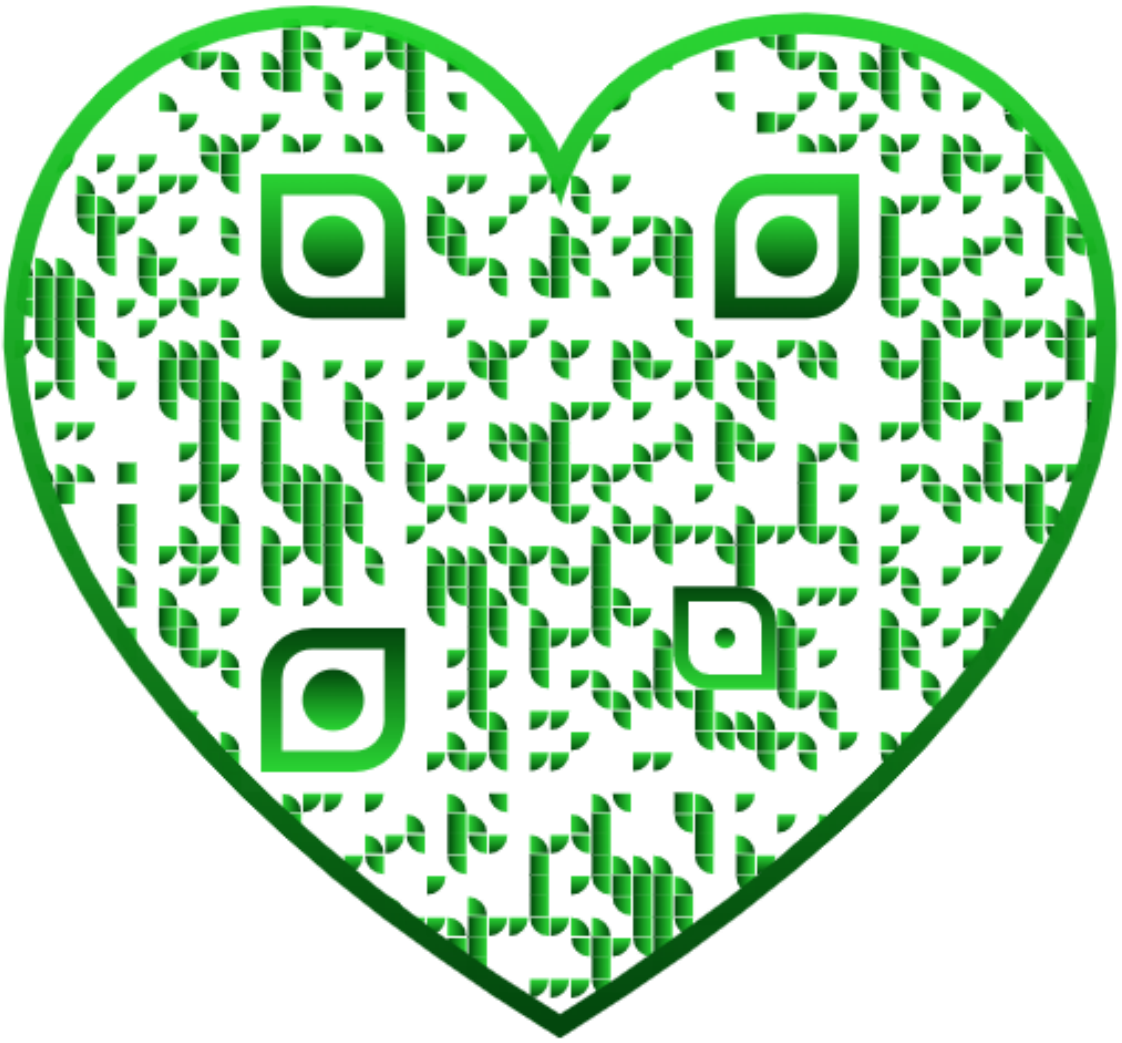
CHARLES RIVER EDITORS

the Evolution of Christmas



The History of the Christian Holiday from the Birth of Jesus to Today

GUSTAVO VAZQUEZ-LOZANO



The Evolution of Christmas: The History of the Christian Holiday from the Birth of Jesus to Today

By Gustavo Vazquez-Lozano & Charles River Editors

Nina No's picture of a medieval mosaic of the Magi

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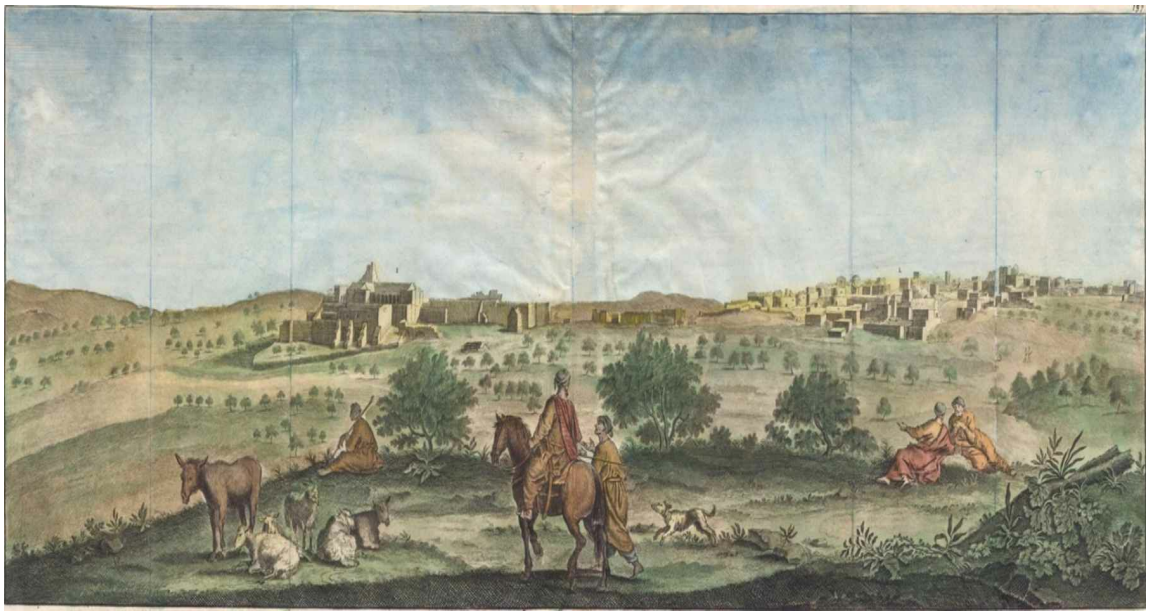
Introduction

The Evolution of Christmas



A 1698 sketch of Bethlehem

"From the beginning, the Church´s hold over Christmas was (and remains still) rather tenuous. There were always people for whom Christmas was a time of pious devotion rather than carnival, but such people were always in the minority. It may not be going too far to say that Christmas has always been an extremely difficult holiday to *Christianize*." - Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas*

Christmas is the most important holiday of the year. After the corresponding days that exalt the national pride of each country, such as Independence Day in the United States, Victory Day in Russia, or Bastille Day in France, it's December 25 that articulates the life, the work and the economy in much of the world, including many non-Christian countries. Since ancient times, the beginning of winter has been the occasion for most people to eat, drink, dance, and get together to beat the drum and take a break.

Especially since the 20th century on, the days adjacent to the holiday have

become an occasion to do big business. The winter season is the most solid stimulus for the economy - more than any fiscal package - since the incomes of families, spending, credit, and consumption in all productive sectors are significantly increased. In the United States alone, Christmas sales are estimated to generate $3 trillion.

This jubilee of consumption and purchase of goods and gifts is accompanied by a series of child-pleasing customs: a pine tree with lights and ornaments inside the homes; Christmas carol;, preparation of sweet meals and treats; the chubby figure of Santa Claus; and, to a lesser extent, Nativity scenes depicting the birth of Jesus. Each country also preserves exclusive traditions that are highly esteemed among their own population. In Russia, people cook 12 dishes in honor of the 12 apostles, then return to the church for an all-night vigil. In Estonia, children must sing before receiving their gifts. In Mexico, groups of people wander from door-to-door singing the story of Joseph and Mary when they were searching for a place to stay, and inside the house that receives them, they break piñatas full of candy. In the United States, the streets are decorated with colorful lights, and choirs of children sing carols beside huge fir trees. In India, even with its Christian minority, people call Christmas "the big day" and celebrate it by planting trees.

The holiday animates debate, too. For those interested in history, it is the time of documentaries on television where so-called experts repeat the worn-out speech that the Church deliberately put the date of Christmas over a pagan celebration, the Saturnalia, or *Sol Invictus,* the solar god of the Roman Empire. Others will say that Santa Claus is a legacy of Norse mythology related to Odin's journey through the heavens, and that the star of Bethlehem could have been a spectacular planetary conjunction that occurred in 7 BCE. For the self-denominated neo-atheists, it is the time to offer interviews on major networks and declare that everything is a hoax, and that the story of Jesus’s birth is a myth copied from the story of the god Mitra. The celebration goes unnoticed for no one, making Christmas arguably the only holiday that, for better or worse, unites the whole planet.

How did things progress from that story in the Bible, with a Jewish girl giving birth to the Messiah of Israel in a manager in the city of Bethlehem, to

the modern colossus that is the Christmas holiday? How did Santa Claus, the Christmas tree, the snow sleighs, the presents, and family reunions become the distinctive features of the holiday if none of them were there at the beginning? The answers can be attributed to a chain of events, characters, oral traditions, artistic works, and an assimilation of local (especially Germanic) folklore that came together to create Christmas as the world now knows it.

The Evolution of Christmas: The History of the Christian Holiday from the Birth of Jesus to Today looks at how Christmas was originally commemorated, the various traditions that became associated with the holiday, and how the history of Christmas ended up the way it did. Along with pictures depicting important people, places, and events, you will learn about Christmas like never before.

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The Ancient Origins of Christmas

The origins of the holiday all began in some small Christian community in the ancient Near East, when an anonymous author wrote a narrative about a birth: "For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." (Lk 2:11-12) His intention was certainly not to present a touching, sentimental story. For those who could listen to it attentively, it was subversive and challenging, and in the 1st century CE, when the vast majority of people could not read, those stories were meant to be heard and then discussed together. Without knowing it, that anonymous writer who first read the story of Jesus's birth, somewhere in a corner of the Roman Empire in front of a group of Christian believers, celebrated the first Christmas in history.

Thus, the first way in which people celebrated, and remembered Christmas was by reading and listening to the narrative of Jesus´ birth in communities. The oldest accounts of the birth of the Christian Messiah are found as overtures in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, both written around 80 CE, independently of each other. Examined carefully, attentive readers will find that the New Testament contains two different birth stories with only a few points of mutual agreement and contact. Those two or three points where both narratives concur - that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, that His parents were called Joseph and Mary, and that his birth was because of the Holy Spirit - point to the existence of an earlier tradition from which both writers took their material.

Most likely, apart from one or two circumstantial details, the gospel writers ignored a number of facts about Jesus's birth, and if anyone had known the details, by the end of the 1st century CE they had been forgotten. The tradition of writing a Greco-Roman biography, unlike a modern biography, did not focus on every aspect of a person's life, but only the most important deeds. Hence the narratives of Jesus´s birth are, in all probability, more homily than history, and more parable than fact. What can be taken from the narratives is that Jesus was born in Judea in about 4 BCE, in the last days of the reign of

King Herod, that his parents were peasants, and their names were Joseph and Mary. Regarding the day and month of the year in which this happened, there can be no certainty.

Luke the Evangelist wrote the better-known version of Jesus's life around 80 CE. In his narrative, Jesus's family was originally from the small town of Nazareth, but had to travel to Bethlehem because there was a census. His mother, Mary, was at the end of her pregnancy when they set out on the journey. When they arrived in Bethlehem, there were so many people in the town that they could not find a place at the inn, and the couple had to use a manger to spend the night. Mary gave birth that night and the news spread rapidly. Luke wrote, "In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.' When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, 'Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.' So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. (Lk 2:8-16).

***Adoration of the Shepherds* by Gerard van Honthorst**

Another anonymous writer, which tradition has identified as the apostle Matthew, wrote a slightly different narrative. Although he agrees on the name of Jesus's parents, that his conception was miraculous, and that Mary gave birth in the town of Bethlehem, according to Matthew the child was not born in a manger, but in a house. Moreover, any mention of the census or the journey from Galilee in the north to Bethlehem in the south is absent. Instead of shepherds and angels in heaven, there is a star that guides some wise men from the east[1] to the place where the future Messiah dwells. According to Matthew, "The star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. After coming into *the house* they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." (Mt 2: 9b-10).

To understand why the wise men traveled to Judea requires understanding

the significance of the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism is very much an offshoot of the Indo-Iranian religions, much in the same way Buddhism spun off from Hinduism. The early Indo-Iranian people of Central Asia, also known as the Aryans, believed in a group of gods – so many gods that they could not be counted in one sitting. This animistic, polytheistic religion began to consolidate and be written about, bringing out the beginning of Hinduism, but not everyone was comfortable with having millions, if not countless, deities. Zoroaster did not deny all of these gods, but simply said that there was one all-good, all-powerful god named Ahura Mazda. Zoroaster also said that Ahura Mazda created everything, and that he was in a constant power-struggle with "Evil," in the form of Angra Mainyu, whom he also created.[2]

Thus, the Zoroastrians believed, much like the Jews, that there was one God who was all powerful, and all good. They both believed that He was in a fight with evil, which would only end with an apocalypse, after which there would be a final judgment. Furthermore, Zoroastrians believed that a Messiah would come, and that the Messiah's virgin birth would be heralded by a star.[3] As a result, the Magi were astrologers actively looking for a star, and expected it to lead them to a messiah. The German Catholic theologian Ludolph of Saxony (1295 – 1378 CE) succinctly described the reason the three kings were described as the "Magi" in his *Vita Christi*: "The three pagan kings were called Magi not because they were Magicians but because of the great science of astrology which was theirs. Those whom the Hebrews called scribes and the Greeks, philosophers, and the Latins, wise men, the Persians called Magi. And the reason that they were called kings is that in those days it was the custom for the philosophers and wise men to be rulers…"[4]

Another clue ties the Three Wise Men to ancient Persia. A 6th century mural in the Basilica of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy, is one of the earliest examples of Christian art, and it depicts the Three Wise Men wearing pointed hats, tunics, and trousers – all signs of their eastern origins.[5]

To understand when the wise men visited the infant Jesus requires a detailed understanding of Christ's birth. Most people are mistaken regarding the year of Christ's birth due to the fault of a man named Dionysius Exiguus,

a monk in the land of present-day Romania and Bulgaria during the 6th century CE. He was asked to construct a new Christian calendar to replace the Roman pagan one,[6] so Dionysius – a devout Christian – decided to start his new calendar with the birth of Christ. He thought that he knew when Christ was born, but unfortunately, he made a number of mathematical errors. He based his calculations on the number of years each Roman emperor had reigned, counting backwards to reach the time of Christ.[7] The problem came with Augustus, who was still in power at the time of the birth of Jesus. Augustus is said to have reigned between 31 BCE and 14 CE, but Dionysius cited him as having reigned between 27 BCE and 14 CE.[8]

How did the loss of four years occur? During the first four years of his reign Augustus had ruled under his given name, Octavian, and Dionysius forgot about those four years.[9] He made a second major error by forgetting the year 0. Thus, when Dionysius did his calculations, he went from the year 1 BCE to 1 CE, omitting the year 0 entirely.[10] This made his calculations a total of five years off, a mistake that Christians have been living with ever since.[11] What this means is that Jesus was actually born around 4-6 BCE.[12]

What about the actual day that Jesus was born? To answer this requires discovering when there was a star that behaved like the Star of Bethlehem, which the Three Wise Men followed to Christ's manger. The Bible says that this star was not visible to the wise men all the time; it reappeared as they left Jerusalem having visited Herod's court, and guided them south the few miles to Bethlehem. To clarify – the star first led the Magi from Persia to Jerusalem, and then disappeared, only to reappear again in the south, leading them to Bethlehem.

For centuries people have been trying to figure out what star may have guided the wise men, but nobody had come up with an explanation that fits the Bible's description until recently. To answer this requires thinking as an astrologer would have more than 2,000 years ago. At the time of Christ's birth, something unique was happening in the skies, and an event in the sky that fell within the sign of Aries was seen by the Magi. Ancient astrologists associated the sign of Aries the Ram with Judea. Jupiter is the key – the regal star.[13] Although known as a planet today, this was a star associated with the birth of new kings. When it rose in Aries, it was the first time that it appeared

in that constellation as a morning star alongside Saturn, the moon, and the sun – this focus on Aries the Ram was interpreted as meaning a new king was born in the province of Judea.[14] Whilst modern astronomers would not regard this as particularly important, for the Zoroastrian astrologers of the ancient world this was incredibly significant. This event is believed to have taken place on April 17, 6 BCE.[15]

The Magi are believed to have seen these signs before setting out on their long journey to Jerusalem. Needless to say, traveling from Persia to Jerusalem 2,000 years ago was no small task; as the crow flies it is almost 1,000 miles straight through the Arabian Desert.[16] The Three Wise Men almost certainly traveled to Bethlehem by camel. If the April date is correct, this would have been approaching the warmest time in the year. To avoid the blistering heat, they may have waited until September before setting off.[17] Even so, it is unlikely that they chose the direct route across the vast desert. Their exact route is unknown, but they may have followed the Tigris or Euphrates rivers to Mosul, before crossing to Aleppo at the narrowest part of the desert.[18] From there, it was an easy route south to Jerusalem.

By December that year, Jupiter was again in Aries the Ram, and was positioned almost directly above Bethlehem when viewed from Jerusalem.[19] To the astrologers, Jupiter appeared to be stationary among the stars, meaning the star of Bethlehem was Jupiter.[20] Some have claimed to have discovered the exact spot where the Magi stood and viewed the star, a hill that overlooked the town of Bethlehem, and they have provided a date for the Magi's arrival: December 19, 6 BCE.[21] This meant that Jesus would have likely already been around 8 months old.

The oldest texts of Christianity, the authentic epistles of Paul, written 30 years before the gospels, do not say a word about Jesus's birth, much less give a date. During the first two centuries of Christianity, no mention of December 25 has been found. There are those who have wanted to find clues about the time of the year when Jesus was born by searching into the Gospel narratives. For example, the fact that there were shepherds guarding their flocks at night would mean that the scene could not have happened on December 24, or anytime else around the onset of winter. But then it might be argued that the historical minimum temperature for the month of

December in Galilee ranges from 45-50 degrees Fahrenheit. The month of March is much colder in northern Israel when spring arrives.

However, to engage in this kind of discussion is to miss the point. The stories as told by Luke and Matthew were not meant to be historical reports, but theological statements, in the form of a parable. Luke, for example, needed the shepherds on the scene because Jesus is, for him, the new king, a new David who arose among shepherds. For Matthew, astrologers from distant countries are necessary because "all the nations will be gathered in his presence."

The first Christmas celebrations, without bearing that name, were just that: stories told inside a synagogue where Christianity had not yet parted ways with Judaism or within a Christian community, such as a house or a catacomb, in places where people were worried about being discovered and charged with high treason.

The story of Christ's birth gained enormous popularity and aroused more and more interest among the first Christians. It was only rivaled by the story of what happened between Jesus and the apostles after the resurrection. By the middle of the 2nd century, the Christmas story was much appreciated among Christian communities; and the apocryphal gospels written during that time represent intense literary activity dealing with the birth and childhood of Jesus. In the 2nd century, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and the *Infancy Gospel of James* were composed. Both texts are evidence that there was an appetite to know more details about the Savior´s childhood and His parents. The second text, the *Infancy Gospel of James* was written not for theological purposes, but to satisfy people's curiosity about the events in Bethlehem a century earlier.

The immense number of manuscripts found to date are proof that this text enjoyed a great diffusion in antiquity. The so-called *Protoevangelium* is narrated in the first person, from Joseph's perspective: “And I Joseph was walking, and was not walking; and I looked up into the sky, and saw the sky astonished; and I looked up to the pole of the heavens, and saw it standing, and the birds of the air keeping still. And I looked down upon the earth, and saw a trough lying, and work-people reclining: and their hands were in the trough. And those that were eating did not eat, and those that were rising did

not carry it up, and those that were conveying anything to their mouths did not convey it; but the faces of all were looking upwards. And I saw the sheep walking, and the sheep stood still; and the shepherd raised his hand to strike them, and his hand remained up. And I looked upon the current of the river, and I saw the mouths of the kids resting on the water and not drinking, and all things in a moment were driven from their course. And I saw a woman coming down from the hill-country, and she said to me: O man, whither art thou going? And I said: I am seeking a Hebrew midwife."

How Did Christmas Get Its Date?

Although the *Infancy Gospel of James* offers comprehensive details, including some bordering on bad taste (like the scene of the midwife inserting a finger into Mary, the mother of Jesus, to see if the hymen is still intact), the author did not include a piece of information that would seem essential to the modern readers: the date. This is most likely because the faithful never wondered about it, and nobody knew it.

Of course, that left people free to make their own guesses. At the beginning of the 3rd century, Clement of Alexandria wrote, "There are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord's birth, but also the day; and they say that it took place in the 28th year of Augustus, and in the 25th day of [the Egyptian month] Pachon [May 20]…And treating of His Passion, with very great accuracy, some say that it took place in the 16th year of Tiberius, on the 25th of Phamenoth [March 21]; and others on the 25th of Pharmuthi [April 21] and others say that on the 19th of Pharmuthi [April 15] the Savior suffered. Further, others say that He was born on the 24th or 25th of Pharmuthi [April 20 or 21]."

Thus, at this point in time, despite an increasing interest in the Nativity story, the Church had not established a date for the birth of Jesus, and Christmas as such was not celebrated at all.[22] No apocryphal gospel or New Testament text make any mention of a Nativity celebration. People listening to the New Testament were more interested in the imminent return of the Messiah, and if there was a celebration among the Christian communities, it was probably the Resurrection of the Lord, not Christmas. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the festival..." (1 Cor 5:7-8).

The writings of the Church Fathers, a group of theologians loosely identified as those who wrote during the first three centuries CE, such as Irenaeus, Clement, or Origen, did not mention a celebration on behalf of Jesus's birth, much less on December 25. It is only in the early years of the 3rd century (*ca.* 202 CE) that scholars find the first mention of Christmas in December, in the *Commentary on Daniel* by Hippolytus of Rome: "For the first advent of our Lord in the flesh, when he was born in Bethlehem, was December 25th, Wednesday, while Augustus was in his forty-second year, but from Adam, five thousand and five hundred years. He suffered in the thirty-third year, March 25th, Friday, the eighteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, while Rufus and Roubellion were Consuls."[23]

It is unlikely that there was a Christmas feast at this point. In fact, Origen, who wrote at the same time as Hippolytus, criticized those who celebrate the day of a person's birth, be it that of oneself or a child. Origen wrote, "And that you may know that there is something great in this and such that it has not come from the thought to any of the saints; not one from all the saints is found to have celebrated a festive day or a great feast on the day of his birth. No one is found to have had joy on the day of the birth of his son or daughter. Only sinners rejoice over this kind of birthday. For indeed we find in the Old Testament Pharaoh, king of Egypt, celebrating the day of his birth with a festival, and in the New Testament, Herod. However, both of them stained the festival of his birth by shedding human blood."

It would not be until the next century, with the establishment of freedom of worship in the Roman Empire, that the Church would begin to observe Christmas regularly on December 25, or January 6 in the Orthodox Calendar. There is a second mention of Christmas in the mid-4th century in a Roman almanac that lists the death dates of several Christian bishops and martyrs. The first date listed, December 25, is marked *Natus Christus in Betleem Judeae*, meaning "Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea."

One of the most popular theories is that Christmas was placed at the end of December to replace the Roman Saturnalia, the feast to the god Saturn, an agricultural deity, which was celebrated on December 17. According to Plutarch, "the most numerous social gatherings and enjoyments" took place during that feast, and ample licenses were granted to the slaves, unimaginable

in another time of the year. One of them was the permission to change roles, so the slaves behaved like their masters, and the lords like their servants. Fanny Dolansky, professor in the Department of Classics at Brock University, Ontario, explained, “In antiquity the Saturnalia was lauded for its role reversal between masters and slaves and extension of greater license to all, but especially to slaves, features that privileged slaves in a manner otherwise unparalleled in domestic or civic religious ritual.”[24] An interesting aspect of this festival is that unlike other celebrations, the Saturnalia had a domestic character; Romans gathered and ate with their slaves, something that broke the strict social codes of an ancient Mediterranean society.

Although there is no single ancient source describing the whole festival, but only isolated references, Dolansky imagines it in this way: “Celebrations would have begun on 17 December and lasted for three to seven days depending on the historical period (...) A private feast was central to the entire celebration. Ancient sources record a variety of dining configurations that differed from normative practices by involving a form of role reversal or status inversion: masters dined with their slaves, slaves dined first after their masters had waited on them, or the children of the house served and entertained the slaves. (...) In some households during or perhaps immediately after the feast, gifts were distributed to family members and guests. These ranged from modest items such as writing tablets and dinner napkins, to more costly ones, including slaves and exotic animals. (...) After the feast much of the evening seems to have been consumed by a revel at the which freeborn men and their slaves enjoyed excessive drinking, games, gambling, and literary discussions. (...) In the case of freeborn women there is no indication that they stayed for activities following dinner, and it is possible they did not for the sake of propriety. (...) It was not unusual to see male guests cavorting with flute girls or dancing nude, and everyone was entitled to speak frankly, including slaves who could rebuke their masters with apparent impunity.”

While the proposal that the Church deliberately placed Christmas in December to take advantage of this festival remains the most popular theory of all, it encounters several difficulties. Most notably, Christians were hated precisely for not participating in the festivals of other gods like normal people. The problem with Christians was not that they believed in their own

God, but that they did not believe in the other gods as well, and they refused to make offerings to the emperor. In fact, the Christians resisted assimilation precisely by moving away from festivals. The persecutions of Rome against the Christians at the beginning of the 4th century under the Emperor Diocletian are solid evidence that, even then, the new religion still distanced itself from normal celebrations, such as *Sol Invictus*, established on December 25 by Emperor Aurelian in 274 CE. While that was on the same day as modern Christmas, that day had commemorated as the day of Jesus's birth in some Roman sources for at least 70 years, as made clear by Hippolytus. As Andrew McGowan, an Australian scholar of early Christianity and Anglican priest, succinctly put it, "We don't have evidence of Christians adopting pagan festivals in the 3rd century, at which point dates for Christmas were established. Thus, it seems unlikely that the date was simply selected to correspond with pagan solar festivals."[25]

The first claim that the Church took advantage of a pagan holiday to accommodate its Christmas was written in the 12th century, nearly 1,000 years later. McGowan notes, "A marginal note on a manuscript of the writings of the Syriac biblical commentator Dionysius bar Salibi states that in ancient times the Christmas holiday was actually shifted from January 6 to December 25 so that it fell on the same date as the pagan *Sol Invictus* holiday."[26] And given that the Saturnalia, which is older than Christianity, was celebrated on December 17, not December 25, it's unclear why the Church wouldn't have placed Christmas on December 17 if it really wanted to coopt an existing celebration.

There is a more feasible explanation for how Christmas was established. At the end of the 2nd century, Tertullian of Carthage, one of the Church Fathers, calculated that the date of Jesus's death, 14 Nisan, corresponded to March 25 on the Julian calendar. According to Tertullian, the crucifixion took place on March 25, and in ancient times it was a common belief that people died on the same day they had been conceived in their mother's womb. Therefore, if Jesus had been conceived on March 25, his birth would have occurred nine months later, on December 25.

St. Augustine (354-430) left a testimony that this tradition was already rooted in the Church before his time: "For he is believed to have been

conceived on the 25th of March, upon which day also he suffered; so the womb of the Virgin, in which he was conceived, where no one of mortals was begotten, corresponds to the new grave in which he was buried, wherein was never man laid, neither before him nor since. But he was born, according to tradition, upon December the 25th."[27]

Yet another theory, one less known but still more feasible than that of coopting Saturnalia or *Sol Invictus*, asserts that the birth of Jesus was established as an equivalent to the Jewish feast of Hanukkah, which is celebrated on the 25th of Kislev, equivalent to the month of December in the Julian calendar. On that date, one of the most sacred days for Israel, the Jews celebrate the rebellion of the Maccabees, the reconquest of their nation, and the re-dedication and reopening of the cult in the temple of Jerusalem in 164 BCE. The Gospel of John has Jesus himself celebrating the feast: "Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the Temple, in Solomon's porch." (John 10:22). Since the gospels present Jesus as the new temple, as the light of the world, the notion that Christmas was established as a mirror of the Jewish Festival of Light cannot be quickly dismissed.

Certainly, Christmas did assimilate practices that characterized Saturn's feast, but rather than thinking that the Church intentionally placed the birth of Jesus on a certain day to gain followers, or to substitute one festival for another, the explanation is much simpler. The closeness of the two events led to an inevitable fusion or synthesis that, from the outset, was not kindly received by the Church itself. That is why December 25 was always the most difficult holiday to "Christianize." Far from trying to take advantage of Saturnalia, the agricultural celebrations of the beginning of the winter, which could be found across much of the world in antiquity, followed Christmas like a shadow.

Saints and Merry Mischief

In 270 CE a man named Nicholas was born in Myra, in present-day Turkey. After a journey to Palestine to see the holy places, he became a bishop and attended the famous Council of Nicea. Unwittingly, he would greatly influence how Christmas would be celebrated many centuries after his death.

Details about his life are scarce and were written many years after he died. The most celebrated tradition is that the bishop Nicholas saved three poor girls from prostitution by secretly leaving gold coins on their window for three nights in a row. On the third night, the girls' father discovered their unknown benefactor and fell to his knees to thank him, but Nicholas ordered him to say nothing. Thanks to the generosity and habit of the generous bishop to leave gifts at night, the father was able to pay a dowry for his daughters and have them get married. Over the centuries, this bishop of Turkey, to whom a church was dedicated in Myra, would evolve into the figure of Santa Claus.

A Renaissance painting of the father getting the dowries for the girls

A Greek Orthodox icon that depicts St. Nicholas slapping Arius at the First Council of Nicea

A Russian icon depicting St. Nicholas

There are no contemporary testimonies or works about St. Nicholas. A biography about another saint from the same area, written about 100 hundred years later, mentions a visit to the tomb of Nicholas of Myra. His name also appears on a list of attendees to the Council of Nicea, although the list was written more than a century after the event. These are the two oldest sources mentioning this proto-Santa Claus.

In 520 CE, about two centuries after his death, a church dedicated to him was built on the ruins of an older temple where he supposedly served as bishop. This was confirmed in 2017 by a professional Turkish government excavation that found the remains of the most ancient church beneath the 6th century building.[28] Thus, there is nothing implausible about the existence of a historic St. Nicholas who had the custom of helping the poor and giving gifts anonymously, even if the *Lives* written about him were strongly colored by legend. His feast was set on December 6, and he was named patron of children, which are obviously crucial details for understanding his association with the holiday season.

The conditions were ready for Christmas to take off as one of the most important holidays of Christendom, namely its proximity to the spirited feasts of Saturnalia , the decriminalization of Christianity, the popularity and continued interest in the narrative of Jesus´ birth, and the existence of a revered saint in northern Europe in the month of December who was the benefactor of children and had the custom of distributing gifts at night. Eventually, these would blend to create a phenomenon that transcended the boundaries of religion.

Shortly after the conversion of the Roman Empire by Constantine the Great, Christians began to worship freely in the open. The time to hide was a thing of the past, and ironically, thanks to this freedom, Christians began to assimilate some pagan customs. McGowan explained, “A famous proponent of this practice was Pope Gregory the Great, who, in a letter written in 601 CE to a Christian missionary in Britain, recommended that local pagan temples not be destroyed but be converted into churches, and that pagan festivals be celebrated as feasts of Christian martyrs. At this late point, Christmas may well have acquired some pagan trappings.”[29]

The late autumn celebrations meant drinking and eating more than usual, as

well as a period of rest for the winter, traits present not only in central Europe but in practically all agricultural societies of the past. McGowan continued, “For millennia, people have wanted to spend the darkest part of the year celebrating in a way that diverges from the normal rules and routine,” writes B.K. Marcus of the Foundation for Economic Education, a think tank. “In an agricultural age, that meant overindulging in meat and drink. In a rigid social hierarchy, it meant reversing the ranks, making the wealthy serve the poor.”

According to Stephen Nissenbaum, Professor Emeritus of the University of Massachusetts, Christmas became the most propitious time of the year to accommodate the early winter celebrations, when peasants had the opportunity to eat meat and, most importantly, rest. As with Saturnalia, during that season the privileged classes allowed some excesses, if only temporarily, as a way of compensating the people for the multitude of small injustices throughout the year, and to distract the peasant class from a permanent situation of hunger and destitution. Nissenbaum noted, “The deep freeze of midwinter had not yet set in; the work of gathering the harvest and preparing it for winter was done and there was plenty of newly fermented beer or wine as well as meat from freshly slaughtered animals —meat that had to be consumed before it spoiled. Few people ate much good food at all, and for everyone the availability of fresh food was seasonally determined. Late summer and early fall would have been the time of fresh vegetables, but December was the season —the only season— for fresh meat”.[30]

From the Middle Ages, there are several contemporary accounts of how kings and lords celebrated Christmas, but as is normal in historiography, the commoners left practically no records. However, some scattered testimonies give an idea of the rampant celebrations that people organised whenever they could - and Christmas was one of those occasions - at a time when famine, war and disease were common. During the Middle Ages, Christmas was what Nissenbaum calls a "little Halloween": the dispossessed classes changed clothes, behaved like great lords, acted with power and authority, the children dressed like bishops; the populace was given permission to break into the homes of the landlords to ask for meat, food and other delicacies. If they got them, the peasants responded with their "good will": it was their opportunity to enter a house or castle that they had previously seen only from the outside, and to sing and dance for their lords. “The poor, most often bands of boys

and young men, claimed the right to march to the houses of the well-to-do, enter their halls, and receive gifts of food, drink and sometimes money, and the rich had to let them in. This exchange of gifts for (the peasants´) goodwill often included the performance of songs."[31]

Although the Church authorities frowned upon this way of celebrating the birth of the Savior, they were unable to contain a cultural habit that had taken shape over several millennia. Centuries later, the Puritans in the 13 colonies of North America decided to ban the celebration for that very same reason, but in the end even they had to give in because it was not possible to check something that perhaps responds to the natural rhythm of humanity. Nissenbaum observed, "Christmas was a season of `misrule,´ a time when ordinary behavioral restraints could be violated with impunity. Christmas `misrule´ meant that not only hunger but also anger and lust could be expressed in public. Often people blackened their faces or disguised themselves as animals or cross-dressed, thus operating under a protective cloak of anonymity." The most important role reversal was, however, that of class. If during the whole year the landlords extracted the fruit of their work from the peasants, during the beginning of the winter holidays, it was those from below who demanded things, and those from above who gave carte blanche. In essence, they exercised charity in exchange for the happiness and good behavior of their vassals during the rest of the year.

An example of this can be read in a poem by Thomas Tussee (1515-1580), a musician related to English royalty, in which he described how the English nobles practiced hospitality during the Christmas season.

"Good husband and housewife, now chiefly be glad
Things handsome to have, as they ought to be had,
They both do provide against Christmas do come,
To welcome their neighbour, good cheer to have some;
Good bread and good drink, a good fire in the hall,
Brawn pudding and souse, and good mustard withal.

Beef, mutton, and pork, shred pies of the best,
Pig, veal, goose, and capon, and turkey well dressed;
Cheese, apples, and nuts, jolly carols to hear,

As then in the country is counted good cheer.

What cost to good husband is any of this?”

Regardless of whether it was a deliberate strategy of the Church to establish the day of Jesus’s birth at the beginning of the boreal winter,[32] the fact is that, almost inevitably, all those displays of joy and self-indulgence took place during the holiday, until the holiday itself basically became associated with those traditions.

Innovations and Additions to the Holiday

During much of the Middle Ages, December 25, not January 1, was one of the two most popular dates to mark the beginning of the new year. The other was March 25, the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Other holidays were added to the calendar in December around Christmas, such as the day of the Holy Innocents, dedicated to the infants who King Herod had murdered in Bethlehem to attempt to eliminate the Messiah, as well as the feast of the Epiphany on January 6, which was dedicated to the Magi who visited Mary at the manger. For many years, the Epiphany was known as the "little Christmas." Later, from the 5th century onwards, the observation of Advent was added, a period of one month of preparation for Christmas which was gradually transformed into four weeks of anticipated celebrations and house decoration.

Like the ancient Romans, the Germanic peoples had a 12-day festival in winter called Yule, the name of the month which was equivalent, more or less, to the current month of December. Winter was the time when more slaughter of cattle was carried out since the grain would be scarce in the season. In conjunction with that, the slaughter of pigs and horses became customary, and there was an abundance of meat. The most charming aspect of this celebration was the ritual of the Yule log, which consisted of going out to look for a tree, cutting it down, and taking it home as a symbol of prosperity for next year, an appreciated family routine that spread throughout Europe.

Already well into the Middle Ages, shortly after St. Cyril evangelized Eastern Europe, there appeared a character that some scholars believe

inspired the figure of Father Christmas, or Father Winter in the Germanic countries. This was Wenceslaus, the young duke of Bohemia who ruled between 921 and 935. Wenceslaus’s father died when he was 13, and although the boy became a duke, his grandmother took over as regent. Jealous of the woman's power over her grandson, Wenceslaus's mother had her strangled with a veil. She immediately took power and began to persecute the Christians until Wenceslaus finally took over the government at the age of 18 and sent his mother into exile. The young man put an end to the persecution and was known for showing great piety to his subjects.

In 935, Wenceslaus was murdered by his brother, who was not a Christian. An illustration of the time shows the young duke fleeing from his murderers to a church whose doors have just been shut by the local priest. Immediately after his death, Wenceslaus was considered a saint and martyr, and the patron saint of Prague and Bohemia. Remembered as the "good king" for his conversion and zeal in the spread of Christianity and for his works of charity and piety, tradition says that it was his custom to leave the castle on Christmas Eve with his pages, ride through the snow, and distribute food and clothing to the poor of Bohemia.

A contemporary depiction of the assassination

A few years after his death, four biographies were in circulation. Although they offer legendary material, they also provide some of the oldest instances of celebrating Christmas through acts of compassion and distributing gifts to those in need. A very popular carol in the English language, composed in 1853 by John Mason Neale, narrates King Wenceslaus's walk through the snow to give alms to the poor, and how his fainting page draws strength from the monarch's example:

"Sire, the night is darker now, and the wind blows stronger;
Fails my heart, I know not how; I can go no longer."
"Mark my footsteps, good my page. Tread thou in them boldly

Thou shalt find the winter's rage freeze thy blood less coldly.

In his master's steps he trod, where the snow lay dinted;
Heat was in the very sod which the saint had printed.
Therefore, Christian men, be sure, wealth or rank possessing,
Ye who now will bless the poor, shall yourselves find blessing."

In Wessex, an Anglo-Saxon kingdom south of present-day England, King Alfred the Great (871-899) decreed that the 12 days before Christmas should be kept free of activities other than observations, which he did with such zeal that according to some historians it cost him an important battle.

In 1160, a Spanish Jew named Benjamin de Tudela visited Constantinople, and he included in his writings a description of how Christmas was celebrated at the time: "Every year, on the day of the birth of Jesus the Nazarene, the king (of Constantinople) gives a grand entertainment. There are represented by magic arts before the king and queen, figures of all kinds of men that exist in the world; thither also are taken lions, bears, tigers, and wild asses, which are made to fight together; as well as birds. There is no such sight to be seen in all the world."

As this all makes clear, Christmas attracted ancestral festivities and traditions, which led to the emergence of movements inside the Church to "purify" Christmas and give it the dignity it deserved. One such initiative came not from an official disposition of the pope, but from a countercultural movement that emerged within the Church in the 13th century: the ministry of St. Francis of Assisi in Italy.

In imitation of Christ, the young Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone gave up all his possessions and began an itinerant life. The idea was to restore the Church to its original evangelical poverty. First, he dedicated himself to rebuild churches in ruins, but this was only a symbol pointing to what direction the man's service would take. Already considered a saint in life, when Francis died, he had, according to the tradition, the stigmata of Christ, the wounds of the crucifixion on his hands and feet. Whether this is a legend or not, the fact is that Francis of Assisi contributed an important innovation in the celebration of Christmas which remains to this day: the installation of a Nativity scene for the season, especially in the Catholic world.

A 13th century depiction of Francis of Assisi

A medieval miniature depicting the Nativity

According to a biography of Francis written by his disciple, Thomas of Celano, in 1229, it was three years before his death, during Christmas in 1223, that Francis was near Greccio, a small town of 1,500 inhabitants located between Rome and Assisi. He liked that place because it seemed to him "rich in poverty," and because he had not seen so many conversions in other towns. In that place lived a man named Juan Vellita whom Francis held in special esteem.

15 days before Christmas, Francis told Vellita that if he truly wanted to celebrate Christmas, he should go and get what he was going to ask of him. Francis wanted to "make a memorial of that child who was born in Bethlehem, and in some sort behold with bodily eyes his infant hardships; how he lay in a manger on the hay, with the ox and the ass standing by."

Francis asked his friend to go and get real animals, including an ox and donkey, and he then reproduced the birth scene with people disguised as shepherds. All the inhabitants of Greccio were summoned, the gospels were read, and then there was a simple celebration.

Celano described this celebration, writing, “The brethren, were summoned from many places; the men and women of that town with exulting hearts prepared tapers and torches, as they were able to illuminate that night. At length the Saint of God came, and finding all things prepared, beheld them and rejoiced. The manger had been made ready, the hay ass were led in. There Simplicity was honored, Poverty exalted, Humility commended; and of Greccio there was made as it were a new Bethlehem. The night was lit up as the day, and was delightful to men and beasts. The brethren sang, yielding due praises to the Lord, and all that night resounded with jubilation.”

To represent the infant Jesus, Francis took a real baby and placed him in a manger. At one point, the child fell asleep and Francis went to wake him up. Celano wrote of this, “In the manger he saw a little child lying lifeless, to whom the Saint of God seemed to draw near and (as it were) to rouse the child from the lethargy of sleep. Nor was this vision incongruous; for the child Jesus had been given over to forgetfulness in the hearts of many. At length the solemn vigil was ended, and each one returned with joy to his own place.”

The Nativity scenes, which were installed inside the houses a week or so before Christmas, became popular and spread throughout Europe, with live animals and people replaced by clay miniatures. The Franciscans from Spain brought the innovation to Latin America, where the custom persists to this day. For a long while, this custom did not reach the homes of the United States or Canada because the Puritan settlers were already following different, stricter religious traditions.

The use of evergreens and branches for winter ceremonies stretches back across several ancient European cultures, even though the origins remain murky. Given that in some regions the tree was burned with a human figure engraved on the trunk, some authors suggest the custom may be a historical residue of human sacrifice. It is also possible that the habit of bringing trees home for winter was simply for the purpose of having dry wood, which

would be safe from rain and snow and thus used to light a fire when needed. Initially, the Church disapproved of the custom, considering it a remnant of paganism.

Although the Christmas tree may be a distant descendant of those pines that were brought home in the winter, it has a more direct antecedent in the feast of Adam and Eve, which was celebrated on December 24 in the old Church calendar. According to Phillip Snyder, in the 14th century and 15th century, the Church made street plays of the story of the Garden of Eden. Much like they were over 1,000 years earlier, most of the population was still illiterate and the didactics of the church relied more on music, visual arts, and plays. On December 24, the Tree of Life of Genesis was placed outside the churches and decorated with apples representing the fruit. Before the play began, people paraded down the street, and the actor who would play the role of Adam carried the tree. The tree was supposed to represent an apple tree, but since the feast fell in the winter and apple trees had no leaves, a pine or fir was commonly used instead.

By 1510, Christmas trees had been established in the Baltic countries. There is documentation of the installation of a Christmas tree in Riga on Christmas, and another in the city of Reval in December 1514. In both cases, a group of merchants dressed in gala attires took a green tree to the city market, decorated it with roses, and "in an evident trace of paganism, danced around it and then set it on fire."[33] The tradition took root in Germanic countries. Many people cut cherry branches to take home on St. Andrew's Day, celebrated on November 30, in the hopes that they would blossom by Christmas time. 20 years after the Estonian and Latvian celebrations of 1514, trees were sold at the Strasbourg market in Alsace (now part of France) and decorated inside the houses on Christmas Day.

By the 17th century, trees were a common sight throughout northern Europe. An unidentified 35-year-old man who visited Strasbourg in 1605 left this description in his travel journal: "At Christmas time in Strasbourg people put up fir trees in their living room. Then hang roses cut in papers of many colors, 40 apples, wafer and goldplated (decorations)."[34] That said, this does not mean people were placing pine trees upright in the middle of a living room. In some parts of Austria and Germany, the tree was hung upside down

in a corner of the room and decorated with apples, walnuts, and strips of colored paper. Others were nothing more than thick branches hung from windows and doors. There was still at least a century to go before the symbol took its present shape.

Around this time, historians can trace the first mentions of *Sinterklaas* in Europe, an amalgamation of St. Nicholas, the bishop of Myra in the 4th century, the figure of Father Winter, and possibly the Nordic god Odin. It is not clear at what point the Christian bishop merged with the winter character and possibly with a Nordic god. Most of the elements of the legend of *Sinterklaas* seem too foreign to any Christian tradition, even considering that the lives of the saints acquired fantastic traits during the Middle Ages. According to folklore, *Sinterklaas* rides through the heavens on a horse followed by a cohort of black or demonic helpers who inform him about human behavior. In other versions, *Sinterklaas* arrives in the villages accompanied by a black helper named Zwarte Piet (Black Pete), a diabolical character who inflicted corporal punishments on children or kidnapped them to take them to a place of torment.

In England there is evidence of a personified Christmas, a man called "Sir Christmas" who is not associated with St. Nicholas, dating back to at least 1435. That was the publication year of a Christmas carol attributed to Richard Smart, rector of Plymtree, Devon. The song is a dialogue between Sir Christmas and a group of people who welcome him. In the scene, Sir Christmas announces the birth of Jesus and invites everyone to drink and be merry.

"Who is there that singeth so?

I am here, Sir Christmas.

Welcome, my lord Sir Christmas. Welcome to us all.

Buvez bien par toute la compagnie,

make good cheer and be right merry."

Criticism of the Celebrations

The brightness and high spirits of the many representations of Christmas,

including St. Nicholas, would be extinguished, at least temporarily, not by the arrival of spring, but by a religious revolution inside the Church that took off when a monk named Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church of the castle of Wittenberg.

In many ways, the Christmas holiday as it had been celebrated began to decline after the Reformation, due to the zeal of Protestants who regarded it as an idolatrous celebration worthy of ancient paganism. The Industrial Revolution, the rise of Puritanism in Europe, and criticism of the veneration of saints, which included special dedications to St. Nicholas and St. Wenceslaus, overshadowed the feast in Europe. The Calvinist theologian Walich Sieuwertz wrote, “It is a foolish and pointless custom to fill children’s shoes with all sorts of sweets and nonsense. What else is this but sacrifice to an idol? Those who do it do not understand what true religion is.” In their *History of New York*, Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace write that “since the Reformation, protestants dismissed Christmas as another artifact of Catholic ignorance and deception. Not only was the New Testament silent on the date of Christ’s birth, they noted, but the Church had picked December 25 to coincide with the beginning of the winter solstice, [an] event traditionally associated with wild plebeian bacchanals and challenges to authority.”

A legend attributes the invention of the Christmas tree, or perhaps the "Christianization" of the Yule log, to Martin Luther, who was supposedly walking through the snowy forest one Christmas Eve, saw the beautiful stars shining through the branches of a fir tree, and was so moved that he took one to his house to show his son the genuine Christmas message: that Christ was the light of the world. The origin of this unmistakably apocryphal tale is possibly a painting by an artist named C.A. Schwerdgeburth which shows the initiator of the Reformation and his family sitting around a beautiful Christmas tree.

In 1798, the poet and theologian Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote a letter to his wife in which it is evident that the celebration was already established in his time and that children had acquired a predominant role in it: “On the evening before Christmas Day, one of the parlours is lighted up by the children, into which the parents must not go; a great yew bough is fastened on the table at a little distance from the wall, a multitude of little tapers are fixed in the bough ... and coloured paper hangs and flutters from the twigs. Under this bough the children lay out the presents they mean for their parents, still concealing in their pockets what they intend for each other. Then the parents are introduced, and each presents his little gift; they then bring out the remainder one by one from their pockets, and present them with kisses and embraces.” The Christmas cards, which would become a gigantic industry, were only a few years away.

Some of the earliest Christmas cards were true pieces of art, and they would often portray an incandescent star in the sky with a long cauda, another essential Christmas emblem. What does this have to do with the star that the Magi saw in the East and followed to Bethlehem? One cannot help but wonder whether a spectacle that was seen on Christmas Eve 1758 had something to do with it, an event that revolutionized the history of science.

That Christmas Eve, an ecstatic astronomer named Johann Georg Palitzsch saw Halley's Comet appear in the sky, as was predicted 53 years earlier by Edmund Halley. It was the first time that science proved that the "star" did indeed return every 75 years, making it an unforgettable Christmas for many.

Christmas in Modern Times

“Dear Editor —

I am 8 years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, ‘If you see it in *The Sun*, it's so.’ Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?” - Letter written by Virginia O´ Hanlon in *The Sun* newspaper (1897)

On Christmas Eve in 1818, in a small Austrian village near the present border of Germany, Father Joseph Mohr brought a simple but beautiful poem to his friend Franz Gruber, the church organist of the neighboring town of Arnsdorf. Mohr, in charge of the small church in Oberndorf dedicated to St. Nicholas, had written the verses two years earlier, and legend has it that the organ of St. Nicholas had broken down and Mohr wanted Gruber to compose a guitar accompaniment. The preacher didn't want that night's Christmas service without music.

Although the broken organ part has been considered a picturesque detail of the legend, the truth is that Gruber, with Mohr's lyrics, wrote one of the most famous Christmas carols that very evening. At that night's Christmas Mass of December 24, 1818, Gruber and Mohr sang together before the parishioners, and the world heard Silent Night for the first time.

A lot of the music which people most associate with the birth of Jesus Christ came from the heart of Europe, like the tradition of the tree inside the house and the figure of St. Nicholas-*Sinterklaas*. Not in vain, it has been said that Christmas as people know it is an invention of Germanic and Dutch peoples, and the migration of these Europeans to the United States greatly contributed to the ubiquity of the feast. If at the beginning of the common era, Christianity benefited from having conquered Rome, now Christmas was going to get the same benefit by being disseminated to North America.

1804 would prove to be another milestone in the history of Christmas. In that year, an antique dealer named John Pintard founded the New York Historical Society, and he promoted St. Nicholas as patron of the city. Five years later, the writer Washington Irving published, under a pseudonym, a semi-fictional account of New York. Irving took ample poetic licenses to

fabricate some myths about the founding of the metropolis, and in one of them, admirer Olaf Van Cortlandt, one of the founders of New Amsterdam, has a dream where St. Nicholas reveals to him the bright future awaiting that immensity of forests and lakes: “And the sage Oloffe dreamed a dream—and, lo! the good St. Nicholas came riding over the tops of the trees, in that self-same wagon wherein he brings his yearly presents to children. And he descended hard by where the heroes of Communipaw had made their late repast. And he lit his pipe by the fire, and sat himself down and smoked; and as he smoked the smoke from his pipe ascended into the air, and spread like a cloud overhead. And Oloffe bethought him, and he hastened and climbed up to the top of one of the tallest trees, and saw that the smoke spread over a great extent of country—and as he considered it more attentively he fancied that the great volume of smoke assumed a variety of marvelous forms, where in dim obscurity he saw shadowed out palaces and domes and lofty spires, all of which lasted but a moment, and then faded away, until the whole rolled off, and nothing but the green woods were left. And when St. Nicholas had smoked his pipe he twisted it in his hatband, and laying his finger beside his nose, gave the astonished Van Kortlandt a very significant look, then mounting his wagon, he returned over the treetops and disappeared.”

Pintard

The following year, the Society commissioned artist Alexander Anderson to make a painting for its annual dinner on December 6, St. Nicholas Day. Anderson's painting, a triptych, shows St. Nicholas holding a rod and standing in front of a honeycomb. Next to him is a dog, but other elements of the legend have been lost.

The right side of the triptych is the most interesting. At the top are two boys, a girl with her apron full of fruit, smiling, and a boy with empty hands, wiping his tears. Underneath the children is a chimney with two stockings hanging on both sides; one is full of gifts and the other has thistles. The scene is completed by toy soldiers and a cat at the foot of the fireplace. The name *Sinterklaas,* which was difficult for American children to pronounce, would evolve into Santa Claus in the United States.[35]

Around that time, two other literary works appeared and helped shape Christmas. The first was a collection of stories by Washington Irving, entitled *Sketch Book*, from 1819. The work "not only gave to American literature the characters of Ichabod Crane and Rip Van Winkle, but sparked widespread interest in Christmas as a cozy domestic ritual."[36] Next came *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, a children's poem better known as "The Night Before Christmas," which was published anonymously in 1823, but is traditionally attributed to Clement Clarke Moore, a university professor and Biblical scholar. The poem spread quickly and helped install a definitive image of Santa Claus in the popular imagination, with his sleigh, his eight reindeer (each one with a name), his red nose, and his journeys down chimneys to fill children's stockings with toys. Supposedly, Moore got his inspiration during a shopping outing in a sleigh, and he based his Santa Claus on a Dutchman who lived in Chelsea.

"So up to the house-top the coursers they flew,
With the sleigh full of toys, and St. Nicholas too.
And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof
The prancing and pawing of each little hoof.
As I drew in my hand, and was turning around,
Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound.
He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;
A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack.
His eyes -- how they twinkled! his dimples how merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
And the beard of his chin was as white as the snow…"

In less than 20 years, the anonymous poem, freely reproduced in every newspaper in the winter season, was known throughout the United States, and from there it would spread to the rest of the English world. "Genteel New Yorkers embraced Moore´s homey, child-centered version of Christmas as if they had been doing it all their lives."[37] Clement Clarke Moore took credit

for the poem years later, but some literary critics think the real author was a man named Henry Livingston, a farmer who wrote poems and published anonymously. Livingston´s adult children later recalled that their father had read them those verses when they were little children.

Meanwhile, back in Europe, Christmas was actually becoming a minor celebration. In London, it went unnoticed by the majority of the population. "Christmas was a decidedly second-rate holiday in Great Britain," wrote journalist Kate Samuelson for *TIME* magazine in 2017. "At one time, it had been known as a lively pagan festival, for which people dressed up in costumes, but the rise of the Puritans in the mid-17th century led to a crackdown on the holiday and the licentious behavior associated with it."[38] In *The Invention of Christmas*, a documentary by the *BBC* in 2007, Griff Rhys Jones mentions that the December 25 editions of *The Times* did not include a single mention of Christmas for many years. The holiday commemorating the birth of Christ was a lesser celebration compared to other feasts such as Boxing Day.

All of that changed for good in 1843, thanks mostly to Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, which came out on December 17. He wrote it in just six weeks hoping it would be a financial success, but his editors rejected it, arguing that Christmas would be of no interest. Thus, Dickens decided to invest his own money, and within days he had sold 6,000 copies, making it an immediate success. One of the factors that contributed to its acceptance was probably the recent marriage of Queen Victoria to Prince Albert, a German who introduced the Christmas tree to England, and the holiday gradually recovered its domestic charm.

Dickens' ghost of Christmas Present, a spirit "clothed in one simple green robe, or mantle, bordered with white fur," seems to reflect the tradition of Father Christmas, a figure who emerged independently of St. Nicholas and his Dutch counterpart *Sinterklaas*. The English Father Christmas was depicted as a bearded old man by Thomas Nabbes as far back as 1638, with a cap and a fur coat, but he was shown in Elizabethan clothes in an illustration of 1840 in the *London News*, spilling wine out of a pitcher while carrying a log. As for the illustrations for Dickens´ first edition, the ghost of Christmas Present is identical to Father Christmas, except that his suit is green, and he is

sitting on a pile of food, drinks, and other delicacies. Dickens wrote, “Heaped up on the floor, to form a kind of throne, were turkeys, geese, game, poultry, brawn, great joints of meat, sucking-pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, immense twelfth-cakes, and seething bowls of punch, that made the chamber dim with their delicious steam. In easy state upon this couch, there sat a jolly Giant, glorious to see, who bore a glowing torch, in shape not unlike Plenty's horn, and held it up, high up, to shed its light on Scrooge, as he came peeping round the door.”

A Christmas Carol exalted typical Christmas values as forgiveness, compassion, the idea that the holiday is best celebrated with the family, and above all, that there are second chances in life, especially the opportunity to be a better person through love of neighbor. Before the publication of *A Christmas Carol*, the holiday had fallen out of favor, “except in little pockets of the countryside — including the rural area where Dickens lived as a young boy before his family moved to London. Here, Dickens experienced a snowy Christmas every December 25, which presumably influenced his decision to make Christmas day in *A Christmas Carol* a white one, a detail that helped establish snowy weather as the image of an ideal Christmas in the U.K., a notion that still exists today.”[39]

Dickens’ tale not only spurred a revival of the celebration of Christmas, but it was also received as a literary masterwork. “Honour to Genius!,” wrote *The Illustrated London News* a day after that first Dickensian Christmas of 1843. “How shall we convey to our readers the surpassing beauty with which the accomplished author of this seasonable little volume has worked out — or, as he sportively terms it, raised — `the Ghost of an Idea?´ By selecting some of its spirituel yet substantial truths — its impressive eloquence, or its unfeigned lightness of heart — its playful and sparkling humour, or its under currents of thought — its gems of world knowledge, or its gentle spirit of humanity — all of which light up every page, and, of a truth, put us in good humour with ourselves, with each other, with the season, and with the author?”

According to historian Les Standiford, who wrote *The Man Who Invented Christmas*, Dickens' work contributed to the revitalization of the holiday in England first, and then in the United States. Some ingredients that were

already there were preserved, while others (such as the custom of disguising as animals, initiating riots, or putting on the clothes of the opposite sex) were disposed of or forgotten. With the changes, the holiday took on a more spiritual and human dimension. “Before *A Christmas Carol*, you’d never ask questions about the meaning of Christmas,” said Standiford to *TIME* magazine in an interview, “And we now ask it all the time. I think that’s because of what Dickens’ book suggests. It has this magical idea that in spite of all our differences, we can make something good happen — something which, in this day and age, it’s important to remind ourselves of.”

Several sources from the time are consistent with Scrooge's visions of Christmas in the mid-19th century and late 19th century. A *Statistical Account of Ireland* published at the beginning of the 20th century describes how “at eight o'clock on Christmas Eve, the bells greet Old Father Christmas with a merry peal, the children parade the streets with drums, trumpets, bells, or perhaps, in their absence, with the poker and shovel, taken from their humble cottage fire; the yule candle is lighted, and supper is served, of which one dish, from the lordly mansion to the humblest shed, is invariably furmety; yule cake, one of which is always made for each individual in the family, and other more substantial viands are also added.” The same source describes the holiday in the city of Culdaff: “(At) Christmas, it is customary with the labouring classes to raffle for mutton, when a sufficient number can subscribe to defray the cost of a sheep. During the Christmas holidays they amuse themselves with a game of kamman, which consists in impelling a wooden ball with a crooked stick to a given point, while an adversary endeavours to drive it in a contrary direction."

An English author of the time chronicled a Christmas in Paris in 1823, emphasizing the spirit of family reconciliation and coexistence that he presumed was characteristic of the English: "The French listen to the Church music, and to the singing of their choirs, which is generally excellent, but they know nothing of the origin of the day and of the duties which it imposes. The good English habit of meeting together to forgive offences and injuries, and to cement reconciliations, is here unknown.”

In the United States, newspapers were delighted to describe the exquisite Christmas trees of the German Kaiser and his family. Instead of a little tree

on the table, as in Luther's painting, in North America the Christmas tree reached the ceilings of the houses. Massachusetts claims to be the first state in America where a Christmas tree was put up, and there are references to this custom since at least 1821. An 1832 booklet distributed by the American Sunday School Union of Boston describes the Christmas tree of one Charles Follen, a German who lived in Boston: “I was present at the introduction into the new country of the spectacle of the German Christmas-tree. The tree was the top of a young fir, planted in a tub, which was ornamented with moss. Smart dolls and other whimsies glittered in the evergreen, and there was not a twig which had not something sparkling upon it. When the sound of wheels was heard, we had just finished; and we shut up the tree by itself in the front drawing-room, while we went into the other, trying to look as if nothing was going to happen. It really looked beautiful; the room seemed in a blaze, and the ornaments were so well hung on that no accident happened, except that one doll's petticoat caught fire. (...) The children poured in, but in a moment every voice was hushed. Their faces were upturned to the blaze, all eyes wide open, all lips parted, all steps arrested. The first symptom of recovery was the children's wandering round the tree. At last a quick pair of eyes discovered that it bore something eatable, and from that moment the babble began again. They were told that they might get what they could without burning themselves; and we tall people kept watch, and helped them with good things from the higher branches. When all had had enough, we returned to the larger room, and finished the evening with dancing.”[40]

In 1850 Charles Dickens described the German "new toy" in a short article entitled “A Christmas Tree.” The legendary author wrote, “I have been looking on, this evening, at a merry company of children assembled round that pretty German toy, a Christmas Tree. The tree was planted in the middle of a great round table, and towered high above their heads. It was brilliantly lighted by a multitude of little tapers; and everywhere sparkled and glittered with bright objects. There were rosy-cheeked dolls, hiding behind the green leaves; and there were real watches (with movable hands, at least, and an endless capacity of being wound up) dangling from innumerable twigs; there were French-polished tables, chairs, bedsteads, wardrobes, eight-day clocks, and various other articles of domestic furniture perched among the boughs, as if in preparation for some fairy housekeeping; there were jolly, broad-faced

little men, much more agreeable in appearance than many real men--and no wonder, for their heads took off, and showed them to be full of sugar-plums; there were fiddles and drums (...) real fruit, made artificially dazzling with gold leaf; imitation apples, pears, and walnuts, crammed with surprises (...) There was everything, and more."

The constant influx of European immigrants to the United States throughout the 19th century ensured that the "German toy" would spread throughout the country. Tree adornments and ornaments were sold on the corners of German neighborhoods, and glass baubles were imported in the 1870s to America. In 1880, Thomas Edison designed a cable with small light bulbs to decorate his laboratory, and one of his assistants took the idea, made it larger, painted the lights red, white, and blue, and put them around his Christmas tree. In Mexico, an eminently Catholic country, the "German toy" arrived during the brief reign of Maximilian of Habsburg and Princess Charlotte, both of German ancestry, who introduced the fashion in Mexico at Christmas in 1864.

Meanwhile, the turning point for old St. Nicholas, now Santa Claus, came with the December 24, 1881 edition of *Harper´s Weekly*. Artist Thomas Nast gave him his definitive look for the Christmas issue as an old man with a huge round belly and a belt, a thick white beard, a red nose, a cap, mistletoe on his head, a miniature horse toy in one hand, a pipe between his fingers, and a child hanging from his neck.

In countries with a Catholic tradition, such as Mexico and the rest of Latin America, the holiday kept its eminently religious character well into the 20th century. The most that could be expected on that day was a more cheerful Mass, one not as strict as the others that took place the rest of the year. In 1897, a Mexican newspaper described how Christmas was celebrated in that country: "In this blessed time the Church ceremonies, always severe and majestic, become joyful and, so to speak, boisterous. All the noise that a hundred little shavers (children) can make with drums and whistles is admitted in the temples during the holy sacrifice of the mass, instead of solemn music, and the organ plays sonatas and harmonies that in no other time would be allowed."

In most Christian countries, whether they were Protestant, Orthodox, or

Catholic, the festival was added to the calendar as an official day of rest. According to an American newspaper of the time, Christmas was "a festival sacred to domestic enjoyments…a time when men make glad upon one day the domestic hearth, the virtuous wife, the innocent, smiling merry-hearted children and the blessed mother." Foremost, Christmas disassociated itself from the medieval carnival antics of the lower classes, and thanks to Dickens and others, it had been repurposed as a family celebration, and a day to practice virtues, especially forgiveness. In the process, it assimilated European elements such as the Christmas tree and the figure of Santa Claus, the preparation of special meals, and the exchange of gifts.

One of the most representative moments was the Christmas Truce of 1914, shortly after the start of World War I. In several places along the Western Front, British, French and German troops made an unofficial ceasefire and crossed the dividing line. They shook hands, exchanged food and souvenirs of their country, and at some point they even played improvised football matches. One soldier, Bruce Bairnsfather, recalled, "I wouldn't have missed that unique and weird Christmas Day for anything. ... I spotted a German officer, some sort of lieutenant I should think, and being a bit of a collector, I intimated to him that I had taken a fancy to some of his buttons. ... I brought out my wire clippers and, with a few deft snips, removed a couple of his buttons and put them in my pocket. I then gave him two of mine in exchange. ... The last I saw was one of my machine gunners, who was a bit of an amateur hairdresser in civil life, cutting the unnaturally long hair of a docile Boche, who was patiently kneeling on the ground whilst the automatic clippers crept up the back of his neck."

The Christmas Truce lasted patchily for several days. The reaction of the soldiers to this extraordinary period of ceasefire and fraternization varied. Some, such as then-corporal Adolf Hitler, who distinguished himself shortly before the Christmas Truce by dragging a wounded officer to safety under heavy fire, expressed disgust at mingling with the enemy, even in the Yuletide tradition. Others entered into the occasion's spirit wholeheartedly, even discussing a permanent peace. Another sizable group welcomed the occasion for a day or two's respite and holiday enjoyment, yet remained keen, refusing to relax their martial impulses or their fierce determination to win. As Bairnsfather put it in his memoirs, "There was not an atom of hate on

either side that day; and yet, on our side, not for a moment was the will to war and the will to beat them relaxed. It was just like the interval between the rounds in a friendly boxing match." (Bairnsfather, 1916, 92).

Unfortunately, that was the only Christmas truce of the war, because in the years that followed, commanders strictly prohibited such spontaneous truces.

In 1931, Santa took a more modern form thanks to the illustrations of artist Haddon Sundblom for Coca-Cola. Sundblom's Santa bears an impressive resemblance to the artist who for 33 years worked for the soft drink company. Sundblom made the image of Santa Claus - a fusion of St. Nicholas, the Dutch *Sinterklaas* and the Anglo-Saxon Father Christmas - a universal character in such a warm and realistic way that Coke continues to use it to this day. Virtually every representation of Santa Claus in the world is based on Sundblom´s version.

Thanks to technological advances and the popularization of the arts, Christmas had a new vehicle to be present everywhere. Popular music, cinema, literature, and television lent more presence to Christmas and, at the same time, benefited from it, especially in times of war, conflict, and uncertainty. It was a mutually beneficial relationship.

The year 1942 was a great milestone in the history of "pop" Christmas, with the recording of *White Christmas* by Bing Crosby which continues to this day as the best-selling single of all time.[41] Another notable milestone in pop culture related to Christmas was the release of *A Charlie Brown Christmas* in 1965. Made by *Peanuts* creator Charles M. Schultz, it was a TV special that, amazingly, quoted the New Testament verbatim. Half of the people living in the United States watched the original broadcast.

Critics have rightly observed that Christmas as people recognize it today is pretty much a 19th century invention with an eminently commercial objective. Everything that distinguishes it was invented, or borrowed from remote times, with the purpose of selling something, such as ornaments, candy, music, meals, gifts and even the Xmas tree itself. Many companies generate 20- 30% of their income during the Christmas season. In the United Kingdom, 7 out of 10 dogs receive gifts on that day. In her essay *Christmas, Ideology and Popular Culture*, popular musicologist and feminist Sheila

Whiteley denounced Christmas as being invented to sell, and that it was so from the beginning.

In a somewhat related vein, Christmas, which “waves a magic wand over this world, and behold, everything is softer and more beautiful,” may ironically be the most stressful time of the year. For many people, especially after a certain age, Christmas is the perfect occasion to relive emotional trauma and memories of lost loved ones, precisely because the holiday atmosphere recreates years gone by. Others will strive and inevitably fail to have a perfect holiday.

Was Christmas invented to sell? Does Christmas entail a commitment to be merry and joyful, or to give presents and have a perfect family banquet? After all, Christmas is ostensibly about Jesus’s birth and the beginning of a larger narrative about Israel under the control of Rome. The birth narratives were overtures to convey a message about a new movement and a radical program. It was a powerful narrative, not a date or a holiday, let alone one about fir trees, mistletoes, carols, or a chubby Dutchman coming down a chimney in a red suit. All of this, including the pious legends about the animals in the manger kneeling before the child, or the venerable Nativity scene invented by Francis of Assisi, were later additions to the original narratives.

In some ways, as noted before, debating the veracity of the Nativity accounts misses the point. Regardless of whether there really was a star, a virgin birth, or three wise men, what the gospel writers wanted to do was to contextualize Jesus’s birth, and to present him as the new Moses or as God's true elect, as opposed to the emperor of Rome.

Many skeptics have observed how, for example, that no historian mentions the slaughter of the innocent children by King Herod as described in the New Testament. It stands to reason that contemporary historians like Josephus would have mentioned the slaughter if it had really happened. It is possible, however, that Matthew is speaking in parables. Herod had three of his own children killed, because he was paranoid that they would conspire against him, and when he was on his deathbed (around the time Jesus was born), he ordered that when he died, one member of every family in Israel be put to death so that there would be national mourning throughout the country. In this context, writing a narrative of Herod killing the nation's children is a

clear denunciation that the House of Herod was dangerous and capable of the mass murdering of innocents.

The slaughter of the innocents in Matthew also points to an older story planted in the mind of every Jew: that of the Pharaoh of the Exodus, who ordered the murder of all firstborn males. When Matthew writes about Mary and Joseph returning from Egypt with their child to Israel, re-enacting the route of the Hebrews in the Exodus, the message is clear: is the new Moses. The Sermon on the Mount reinforces this image - just as Moses descended from Sinai with the word of God, Jesus also gave the new law on a mountain. For Matthew, this is what Christmas meant.

Luke's narrative served another purpose. To understand it, readers have to be familiar with the region in the 1st century CE. John Dominic Crossan has convincingly explained how the evangelist was actually writing subversive literature. After 20 years of civil war, a triumphant Octavian had been proclaimed Augustus (divine), or *Sebastos* in Greek (one to whom worship is due). If other emperors had been deified after death, Octavian was declared to be a god in life, a divine incarnation. The Roman historian Suetonius, writing at the same time as Luke, thus narrates the birth of the emperor in *The Twelve Caesars*: “When Atia had come in the middle of the night to the solemn service of Apollo, she had her litter set down in the temple and fell asleep, while the rest of the matrons also slept. On a sudden a serpent glided up to her and shortly went away. When she awoke, she purified herself, as if after the embraces of her husband, and at once there appeared on her body a mark in colours like a serpent, and she could never get rid of it; so that presently she ceased ever to go to the public baths. In the tenth month after that Augustus was born and was therefore regarded as the son of Apollo. Atia too, before she gave him birth, dreamed that her vitals were borne up to the stars and spread over the whole extent of land and sea, while Octavius dreamed that the sun rose from Atia's womb.” (Suetonius: 94:4).

The second contemporary text to consider in order to understand Luke´s message is the inscription found in the ancient Greek city of Priene (in modern Turkey). The stele, which must have been placed in every corner of the Roman Empire for everyone to see, describes the birth of Augustus as the beginning of the “good news” (*evangelion*) and the dawn of a kingdom of

peace: "The birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings for the world that came by reason of him." Octavian's titles were Divine, Son of God, God from God, Lord, Redeemer, and Savior of the World. This was the official discourse and Roman propaganda at the time Jesus was born, and decades later it was still the case when Luke´s story of Christmas was composed, read, and heard in communities.

Given that context, and the terribly strained relations between Jews in the region and the Roman overlords, it is much clearer what Luke was trying to accomplish. In the official propaganda, known to Rome's subjects, Augustus was the conqueror, miraculously born from a divine conception (a human woman and the god Apollo) and his birth marked the beginning of good news, a peace for the whole world. All of this made Augustus divine in the eyes of Romans, but Luke applies these characteristics not to an emperor, but to a Jewish child born in a manger, the son of peasants. He was not plagiarizing a story, but making a specific challenge to anyone who would listen to his narrative. As Crossan noted, "To use any of (those titles) to the newborn Jesus would either be low lampoon or high treason. And since empires always know their opponents, Rome was not laughing." In other words, to say that Jesus was the son of God was tantamount to saying that Octavian was not. Thus, Jews' loyalty was due not to the emperor, but to the child who was born among shepherds.[42]

What does it mean then to celebrate Christmas and remember the birth of Jesus? Borg and Crossan asserted, "Christmas is not about tinsel and mistletoe or even ornaments and presents, but about what means will we use towards the end of a peace from heaven upon on earth." The authentic message of Christmas then is peace through justice. Anything that people do in that spirit, from forgiving debts to being compassionate or giving to others, is a genuine way of celebrating Christmas. In layman terms, Bob Hope may have put it best: "My idea of Christmas, whether old-fashioned or modern, is very simple: loving others."

Online Resources

Other books about ancient history by Charles River Editors

Other books about Christianity by Charles River Editors

Other books about Christmas on Amazon

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[1] The word that the Gospel of Matthew uses is *magoi*, magi in English, possibly Persian astrologers.

[2] De Jong, 1997

[3] Zoroaster himself was believed to have been born by a virgin birth through immaculate conception. See De Jong, 1997

[4] Shore, P. (2012) “The Vita Christi of Ludolph of Saxony and its influence on the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola.” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits, 30* (1).

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[6] Declercq, G. (2002) “Dionysius Exiguus and the introduction of the Christian Era.” *Sacris erudiri*, (41), 165 - 246.

[7] Declercq, 2002

[8] Declercq, 2002

[9] Declercq, 2002

[10] By comparison, in the transition of the last millennium we went from 1999 to 2000 to 2001, not 1999 to 2001.

[11] Declercq, 2002

[12] Humphreys, C. J. (1991) “The Star of Bethlehem a Comet in 5-BC and the Date of the Birth of Christ.” *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society*, *32* , 389.

[13] Humphreys, 1991

[14] Humphreys, 1991

[15] Humphreys, 1991

[16] Eliot, T. S., Voeten, B., and Pauwels, H. (1927) *Journey of the Magi*. Faber & Gwyer.

[17] Eliot, Voeten, and Pauwels, 1927

[18] Eliot, Voeten, and Pauwels, 1927

[19] Humphreys, 1991

[20] Humphreys, 1991

[21] Humphreys, 1991

[22] McGowan, A. (2002). *How December 25 Became Christmas*. Bible Review.

[23] Hippolytus of Rome: Commentary on Daniel, Book 4, 23.3.

[24] Dolansky, Fanny (2011), "Celebrating the Saturnalia: Religious Ritual and Roman Domestic Life".

[25] McGowan, A. (2002). *How December 25 Became Christmas*. Bible Review.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Saint Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Sermon 202.

[28] In December 2017, Turkish officials declared that the bones of St. Nicholas had been found, news that provoked incensed reactions from the city of Bari, Italy, where they had supposedly been taken during the Crusades, and where the magnificent Basilica di San Nicola is located.

[29] McGowan, A. (2002). *How December 25 Became Christmas*. Bible Review.

[30] Nissenbaum, Stephen, *The Battle for Christmas: A Social and Cultural History of Our Most Cherished Holiday*, p. 6.

[31] Ibid.

[32] December is the beginning of summer in the southern part of the globe.

[33] Snyder, Philip V., *The Christmas Tree Book. The History of the Christmas Tree and Antique Christmas Tree Ornaments*, 1976.

[34] *Deutsch: Denken, wissen und kennen*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966.

[35] Ace Collins, *Stories Behind the Great Traditions of Christmas*, 2003.

[36] Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898 by Edwin G. Burrows, Mike Wallace, pp 462.

[37] Ibid.

[38] *How Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol Changed the Way the Holiday Is Celebrated*, Kate Samuelson. TIME Magazine, Nov 21, 2017.

[39] Kate Samuelson, *How Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol Changed the Way the Holiday Is Celebrated*, Time Magazine, November 21, 2017.

[40] Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel* (1838).

[41] And the third best-selling single of all time is also a Christmas track: Bing Crosby´s version of *Silent Night*.

[42] Ibid.